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AUTHOR Koetting, J. Randall
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ABSTRACT

A teacher of educational theory delivers an educational foundations course on sociocultural concerns in education. In this course, teaching is presented as an orientation to the world and a moral enterprise because it intervenes in people's lives. Students typically fear theory classes because they do not want to appear foolish or because theoretical discourse is alienating in its vocabulary or apparently lacking relevance. However, theory cannot be regarded as a merely academic issue. Teaching through dialog is a necessity to ensure the engagement of students in learning and in the exchange of ideas. A research-project form is provided as a model for students to use in asking questions, posing problems, and describing, interpreting, and evaluating their data. (Contains 6 references.) (SLD)

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Title:
On Teaching Theory 11th Annual Foundations Symposium: Dialogue on Applying Critical Approaches to Educational Technology

Author:

J. Randall Koetting
University of Nevada
Reno, NV 89557

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ON TEACHING THEORY

Last year's symposium, as has been the case in many of the other foundations symposia, was concerned with the theoretical ideas that inform our work. This year's symposium is to expand on the theoretical work as well as provide some indications of how the theoretical work is carried out, i.e., what is the nature of our practice. This is not to be misunderstood as a "how to" session, but rather to give a sense of the struggles, tensions, joys and frustrations of our work.

What I have to share here is not magical or earth shattering. It is messy. This messiness is not rooted in a lack of rigor, but rather in the nature of the educational experience itself. This is part of the theoretical framework I presented at last year's symposium. My presentation was entitled "Postmodern Thinking in a Modernist Cultural Climate: The Need for an Unquiet Pedagogy".(1) Unquiet pedagogy is a term from Paulo Freire. Freire states that

> A pedagogy is that much more critical and radical the more investigative and less certainof 'certainties' it is. The more unquiet a pedagogy, the more critical it will become." (Freire, in Kutz & Roskelly, 1991)

Unquiet comes from the confrontation between one's private, personal world and the public world. We always find ourselves within a sociocultural context. An unquiet pedagogy, a critical pedagogy, confronts the social-school-life-world and acknowledges the conflict as part of the human condition. An unquiet/critical pedagogy is informed by and allows for multiple ways of knowing and experiencing the world (technical, practical and emancipatory forms of knowing).

An unquiet/critical pedagogy acknowledges student/teacher voice in the learning process. This pedagogy fosters and helps create democratic forms of schooling through confronting issues of social justice, the creation of community, the common good, and social construction of knowledge.

This notion of an unquiet/critical pedagogy as presented may seem to be "removed" from experience, too abstract and/or nebulous. I think that is because of the language used to describe it. It is not at all abstract (for me) in my teaching. I am referring specifically here to what I teach: I teach theory. I teach a course entitled Sociocultural Concerns in Education. This is an educational foundations graduate course required of all teacher education majors, and all master's programs within the department.

What I try to represent in this course is the complexity of the teaching/learning process, the sociocultural nature of schooling. I represent teaching and schooling within a political context (all education is political), and that teaching is not just a set of behaviors but an orientation to the world, a way of being in the world. I talk about teaching being a moral enterprise because we intervene in people's lives.

For many students, to talk in this way is an introduction to new language, to new understandings and conceptualizations of teaching (2). Hence, we are involved in theory, a discussion of theoretical positions and frameworks.

I do not look for concensus in my class. Students do not have to agree with me. I do look for a willingness to engage in a very (at times) disturbing/unsettling process of self-reflective study of teaching and schooling, and their/my own perceptions of "how things work". "How does what we do in here line up with your perceptions and beliefs?" "How do you, as a scholar/student/researcher/ educator position yourself in relation to this information?" "Does this information cause you to re-think your position?"

Roger Simon's text (1992) Teaching against the grain: Texts for a pedagogy of possibility, presented a challenging way for me to reflect on my teaching. Simon suggests that students fear theory classes, and because of this fear they are silenced (p.81 How does this happen? Many students do not want to appear foolish as they try to enter the world of theoretical discourse. If you fear ridicule, you fear being ridiculous, and hence students say, or behave, as if they have nothing worthwhile to say.

Another way students show a fear of theory is through an expression of anger/frustration. Simon refers to this as the "disruptive character of theoretical knowledge" (p.83). This is experienced not only during class discussion, but re-surfaces as they prepare for class, do assigned reading, etc. In the class discussions, it is represented by attacks on the language of the text, the language used to represent theory. This language is referred to as "jargon", using too big of words, unintelligible talk or writing. Simon interprets this language as adversarial. It is spoken from a position of feeling marginalized, subjected, and dominated (p. 83).

I sense too that theoretical discourse can be very alienating to students. They already have a common, general language/vocabulary, as well as seemingly common experiences that are easily represented by that vocabulary and language (their taken-for-grar ways of talking about and understanding their everyday experiences). To be e ected to use and work with a new language that changes the nature of that experience can provide a challenge to your thinking that can be unsettling, unquiet. This alienation can cause a sense of being excluded from a discourse that is supposed to make sense to them, supposed to have some relevance to their everyday lives (their chosen profession of teaching; again, the disruptive character of theoretical discourse, theoretical language). (3)

Another manifestation of fear of theory is the way students talk when engaged in theoretical discussion. They appear to be hesitant, tentative (Simon, 1992, p.84).
Often times, as they begin their response they say "This is just my opinion, but...." I believe this points up the separation between subjective and objective knowledge, and which is more valid. This also suggests the major separation between theory and practice, the sense that "someone else" produces the theory, and as teachers, they just want to know how to use it. In this sense, perspective teachers don't do theoretical work, they teach. Theory is done at the university, teaching is done in the schools.

This new language also tends to legitimate a particular view of the world that is not familiar. This unfamiliar language suggests that their way might be less adequate. Unless a real open forum exists within the classroom, the pressure to give the professor what s/he wants can be unquieting: they still must get a grade for this class (Simon, 1992, p. 89). It is difficult to throw off all those years of schooling that required of them that they "Play by the rules".

Another text I use in my course is Mike Rose's Lives on the boundary: The struggles and achievements of America's underprepared (1989). This text helps to understand the alienation some students feel as they enter into the academic world. For those of us who have been in academia for a while, we can forget what a strange alienating place higher education can be. Mike Rose writes of education being an invitation into many forms of discourse. These discourses require that students not only learn new vocabulary, but understanding the language systems that help us engage the world in different ways (e.g. the language of the sciences, the language of philosophy, sociology, art, literature, etc.).

It is important to understand that I am not talking about individual inadequacies here, I am not talking about lazy students. I am not blaming students, nor am I apologizing for my teaching. I am talking about human capacities, individual histories and the social form of the institution. And I am saying that study is intensely hard work. Hence I cannot just look at theory as an academic issue, an academic question. Simon (1992) strongly states that theory in education has

> The potential consequences for the organization and disorganization of identities make a pedagogically motivated confrontation with theory a potentiallythreatening and noxious situation. In this sense,classroom language practices are not only a mode of social organization but, also potentially, a mode of disorganization. (p. 92)

How can we work in "theorizing ways" with each other? To return to Paulo Freire's notion of an unquiet pedagogy, a critical pedagogy, we can teach dialogically. The preconditions for dialogue to take place are demanding:

1. a profound love of humankind
2. humility
3. intensive faith in people (an a priori faith in the individual
4. trust (established through dialogue
5. hope (rooted in our sense of incompleteness, our vision of what could be: possibility
6. critical thinking. (Freire, 1970)

Dialogue is always rooted in our lived experiences within our context. This engagement of ourselves with each other and our world is most difficult as well as "messy". We spend much time in talking and listening to each other about our understandings of the world (issues under discussion), as well as engage in academic readings on the same issues. My intent here is to have our conversation, our dialogue, grounded in our experiences. We go back and forth between the theoretical literature and our lived experiences. (See Freire, 1970, and Simon, 1992).

Students in my class are also doing something else. They are engaging others outside the classroom in the conversation (See Carson, 1986). Students are doing field research, conducting interviews, reformulating what they learn through experience as well as through their study. I have provided a rather standard model for asking questions, problem-posing, describing, interpreting and evaluating their data from an interview process (see Research Project form, below).

What is critical here is how the students position themselves to their own studies, their experiences in light of their studies, and the experiences of others within their community. How do we construct a view of the "world" (issues)? How do we view ourselves within this theoretical discourse? Can we understand the arguments of our experiences, the texts, and our data?

As I stated in the beginning of this brief paper, what I do is not magical or earth shattering. It is one way for my students and I to become more active and critical in understanding each other and our context. It allows us to deal with conflict. They tell me they have a greater sense of having control over their own learning. Perhaps this will provide an experience where they are less alienated from the theoretical discourse. It is not perfect, and it is still messy.

ENDNOTES

1. Paper can be found in Proceedings Selected Research Papers. AECT/RTD 1993 Conference, New Orleans, LA. This is a brief statement of my position in the form of a talking paper. An expanded and more clear statement of my position can be found in Koetting, 1994.

2. Examples of this new language would be from social theory, including issues of social reproduction, cultural capital, achievement ideology, the politics of education, etc.

3. An example of this sense of alienation, exclusion, frustration is when some students are first introduced to ideas in social theory, they express a sense of "feeling stupid", inadequate, unable to understand. They complain they have to constantly look words up in the dictionary; they have always felt successful in school before, but in this class they feel lost and "dumb".

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RESEARCH PROJECTS

General guidelines:

1. Identify issue/problem to be investigated. You must define and describe the problem/issue in narrative form. You will need to be specific here in defining terms, establishing meaning right from the start. This will help in the next phase,

which is to develop your questions that will solicit information.

2. Develop your questions. What information are you looking for? What should be the nature of your questions? How can you avoid yes/no questions? You may develop this section in narrative, and you must include a list of the questions in an appendix. Be sure to get demographic data, e.g. male/female, age, schooling, etc. You should consider the nature of your questions when planning for the demographic data needed to interpret findings (#4).

3. Report your findings (data). What did the people say? This is an objective (i.e. descriptive as opposed to interpretive or evaluative) statement of your data. Detail is important here. Let the people speak for themselves, and report that in sufficient "quantity" that the reader can get a "feel" for the conversations.

4. What do (does) your findings (data) mean? How do you, as researcher/student scholar situate yourself in relation to your findings? Does it fit with what you expected? Does it match or give additional insight into what you think/study about? Does it match your beliefs?

5. What do you conclude from your work? What are the implications of what you just learned?

This is not a survey. This is an oral interview, a conversation.